

# Large Classes: Using Groups and Content

---

*By Dr. Nadia Ahmed Toubia*

In Egypt we enjoy the most positive type of bilingual education, referred to as "additive bilingualism." This means that the foreign language does not pose a threat to the learner's mother tongue or identity; on the contrary, the foreign language opens new academic and professional avenues. At all levels, success in a foreign language is a nonnegotiable requirement, and content-based instruction (CBI) offers us the means to challenge our learners and involve them in a meaningful learning experience (Toubia 1994).

In many parts of the world, we have large classes of 60 students or more. This is usually the excuse that teachers give for their reluctance to experiment with new approaches or innovative teaching techniques. In this article I shall describe three different teaching models in which I have used CBI and group work with success. In each of the situations, CBI is the most appropriate model of instruction because it is based on the assumption that for successful language learning to occur, the course content must take into account the eventual use the learners will make of the target language.

Moreover, group work in CBI is ideal for cooperative learning and peer tutoring. The management problems of group work are greatly reduced when dealing with adult learners. In each of the situations below, the learners had no previous experience in group work.

## **First Teaching Model**

These English language teachers are university graduates who, although having majored in other areas, were appointed as English teachers in schools to fill an urgent need. Today they are given the option of studying for degrees in English language teaching. They joined this four-year programme after having struggled through language teaching for a number of years with little knowledge of the basics and numerous misconceptions. They are highly motivated and need this degree to further their careers. They must follow the same programme as the undergraduates in the school of education because they will be awarded the same degree.

The curriculum includes studies in civilization, English literature, and language study. The number of students in the average class is around 70.

As they have not been students for a number of years, they basically lack study skills. Their standard of English is lower than that of the average undergraduate because of fossilization and lack of guidance, and they are generally older than the average adult learner.

The following task is from the course Introduction to the Study of Poetry. The general objective is to develop an understanding and appreciation of poetry while helping learners develop language skills.

For the first-year students, I usually choose a simple piece like the following anonymous Chinese poem:

*Blue Smoke War*

*White Bones Man*

The questions vary and can become more sophisticated and demanding as the students progress. The following are some examples:

1. Discuss and explain the relationship among the words in the first line.
2. Discuss and explain the relationship among the words in the second line.
3. Discuss and explain vertical relationships *blue and white*."
4. Why are there no function words in this poem?
5. Why do you think that the words *war* and *man* are used in the singular?
6. Rewrite the poem in a complete sentence.
7. Write down and explain your personal opinion about this poem (idea, message, writing style).

By the time the students are exposed to longer, more complex poems, they are familiar with brainstorming in groups and are more comfortable answering questions .

As each poem has seven or more questions, the class is divided into seven groups, with each group answering one question.

### Types of group work

Version 1: Each group is assigned a question to discuss among the members and then must report to the rest of the class. During the report, the group may be questioned or the class may offer alternative answers.

Version 2: Each group is assigned a question and required to provide a written answer. The group divides the written task among the members. Each individual is given a responsibility such as to check spelling, grammar, capitalization, or punctuation. The teacher tells them that they may share the task and the grade.

Version 3: Alternatively, each group can divide the written tasks among the group members and, by specifying the division on their papers, each member receives a separate grade.

Version 4: Each group is given an identical set of questions (around four) that they can prepare and present orally to the class. This activity stimulates brainstorming and discussion, which could conclude with a writing activity.

In all cases when a written task is given, I usually comment on the written drafts to the individual groups. If this is not possible in class, I ask that their first and second drafts be handed in with the written assignments.

Using group work as one of the teaching techniques has helped the students gain confidence in their abilities and encouraged the weaker students to participate in class.

The students respond positively to group work and to these classes. Perhaps one of the most positive outcomes of their experiences in these classes is that they witness the success of group work when classroom management is conducted properly. This is especially important because they are all practising teachers who, until now, were reluctant to use such techniques in their own classrooms.

## **Second teaching model**

This model consists of a group of postgraduate students who are studying for the Special Diploma in Education, and they are all practising teachers of different subjects. This is a two-year course that is very popular in the Egyptian teaching context. The class has about 90 students, with roughly nine students per group.

The first year includes such courses as comparative education, educational psychology, statistics, curricula, and English. In most of these courses the students are required to do some reading in English. They may be required to read a study, article, or a chapter (or more) from a book. Additionally, in order to write their assignments, they read references in English texts. Usually the students translate the whole text, even if they need only small extracts of information. This is done professionally and is expensive. During the first few classes of the academic year, I tell students that I will help them deal with English assigned reading materials. The objective of this exercise is to enable students to develop and improve their strategies for abstracting important information from academic textbooks.

### **Reading activity steps**

This exercise has seven steps:

1. I emphasize that they (the students) are not to read a chapter page by page.
2. They need to read the introduction to understand the purpose/goal of the chapter. 3. They should read the summary section at the end of the chapter and decide how the summary relates to the introduction.
4. They must identify the different sections or headings of the chapter and read the subheadings to determine how they relate to the headings.
5. Then they start reading and focus on the first and last sentence of each paragraph. If the main idea is not clearly stated, they are encouraged to "make it up." Attention is paid to words in bold face or italics.
6. They reread the summary section at the end of the chapter and decide if any concepts or important ideas were missed.
7. Then they write notes or points about the information and a simple summary of the chapter.

Usually steps 1 and 2 are done with the whole class, but steps 3 through 7 are conducted in groups in which students are performing identical activities simultaneously. After each activity, the groups report on their findings and are given a little time for discussions. For certain texts, it is possible for groups to work on different paragraphs when dealing with steps 4, 5, and 6. As for step 7, the summary could be written in English or the native language, depending on the assignment given by the content teacher. A slightly different approach is adopted when the students' assignments include two chapters from the same book.

However, if the assignment is to read an academic study or paper, more emphasis is given to reading the abstract and locating specific information in the article and the conclusion. Also, activities related to writing sentences extracted from information found in tables and figures are included and can sometimes be done without reading the text.

It should be noted that a study or article can be covered in one class meeting, but chapters from books usually require two class meetings, depending on what is expected from the students.

### **How the group work is conducted**

To demonstrate this, I will give examples from one of the books we used this year, Philip Robinson's *Perspectives on the Sociology of Education: An Introduction* (1981). (In all classes students are not encouraged to use dictionaries, although I usually have one that they can use if necessary.)

Version 1: We systematically go through the listed reading steps, and students are given ample time to cover each step in their groups.

Version 2: The same procedure is followed but with appropriate time limits for each step.

Version 3: Speed exercises are given in which the groups may compete. The questions or tasks are designed to train students to locate information from the table of contents or the subject/name/word index. Some sample questions are as follows:

1. On which pages can you find information about interaction schedules/sociology of knowledge?
2. Which chapter may include information about education in places like Egypt?

Version 4: Different page references for certain subjects or words are given to students. For instance, since four different pages refer to "behavioural objectives," my question may be: "On which of these pages does Robinson discuss the function of behavioural objectives?"

Version 5: This concerns step 7 when the summary is written in English. It is not unusual for this activity to take a whole class meeting. In this case, the groups write their summaries in the form of process writing, with each member of the group being assigned a specific responsibility.

The students leave these classes with a great sense of achievement because they discover abilities that they did not know they had. The secret of their success probably lies in the fact that they

help each other in groups. They also cover much more material in the limited teaching time, particularly when different groups are doing different things. All these teachers have adopted new attitudes toward group work, and many of them have told me how they use it in their classes.

## A Content-based Course

This is a course rather than an activity model. I designed and wrote it for the Technical Health Institute, Nursing Department. The objective of this project, sponsored by the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), is to revise, write, and compile courses for the institute in which students will study at a national level in Egypt. In the English language 40-hour course textbook, I adopted a content-based approach. The average class is comprised of 60 or more students, who are roughly 18 years old and have a standard of English slightly lower than students participating in the previous situations.

### Content-based activities

The textbook consists of 16 three-part lessons: the first section of each lesson is a reading comprehension text; the second section is a grammar study; and the third section consists of language transfer exercises. It is from the latter section that I have drawn examples of group work activities.

Students are usually required to work in groups when transferring information from flow charts to a comprehensive written paragraph or to a dialogue. These charts are taken from a content text by Alton Thygerson (1987), but in some cases, charts are summaries of the reading texts. As students progress, they are provided with flow charts that contain new information and are easy to understand. Students begin by filling in the blanks and progress to writing paragraphs, applying the skills they have developed. Two examples of these exercises follow (Touba 1997):

1. Examine and study the flow chart (Figure 1 below) entitled Head Injury (Thygerson 1987) and discuss it with other members of your group. Next complete the paragraph below using information from the chart.

In the case of a head injury, after you have completed the essential ABC's, you will check for \_\_\_\_\_. If there is bleeding in the head and you suspect a fracture, you must \_\_\_\_\_ and not \_\_\_\_\_. If the victim is conscious and no spinal injury is suspected, then \_\_\_\_\_. In case a spinal injury is suspected you \_\_\_\_\_; but if the victim is unconscious, then \_\_\_\_\_, and if it lasts for more than 5 minutes, then\_\_\_\_\_.

2. In groups, study the flow chart entitled "Coughing" (Figure 2 below) and then complete the dialogue below. You may be asked to perform in front of the class, but there is no need for memorization because you are simply trying to convey the meaning.

Mona: Now, dealing with coughs is something people do every day!

Azza : Since it is so easy, tell me what to do if a cough is dry and produces no phlegm?

Mona: That's easy. You \_\_\_\_\_and \_\_\_\_\_.

Rana: But you have to \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ if there is phlegm.

Mona: That's right, but what if the cough lasts for more than 5 days or it \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, or the mucus \_\_\_\_\_?

Azza: Then we must \_\_\_\_\_, right?

Rana: But what if none of these things happen?

Mona: Well, if mucus is \_\_\_\_\_, then the cough should not \_\_\_\_\_.

Teachers in the institute have reported that students respond and work well in groups. The teachers have even worked out some variations related to the activities. For example, during a dialogue activity, half of the groups may be preparing the dialogue while the other groups, using the same flow chart, are writing a paragraph.

## Conclusion

I have attempted to give a variety of examples of group work in large classes when the language class is content-based. The teachers' skill in classroom management is the primary ingredient for success with group work in large classes. Students need to be fully aware of what is expected of them and be ready to work to achieve the objectives set by the teacher.

Finally, my personal enthusiasm for group work in large classes is based upon my knowledge that the average teacher cannot hope to capture the attention of all of the students 100% of the time. In a class where roughly 11 groups are assigned meaningful tasks, the chances are that 80% of the students will be actively involved in the task. In my experience this is success. Now my students ask for group work because they appreciate its merits and look forward to the activities.

## References

Robinson, P. 1981. Perspectives on the sociology of education: An introduction. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Thygerson, A. 1987. First aid and emergency care workbook. Boston: Jones and Bartlett Publishers.

Touba, N. 1994. Let's make it happen in language school. Pharos: An ESP Newsletter, 6, 2. ESP Centre, Alexandria University.

Touba, N. 1997. English for nurses. Alexandria: Ministry of Health in collaboration with the World Health Organization.

**Dr. Nadia Ahmed Touba** is associate professor of English Language Methodology in the Faculty of Education, Alexandria University, Egypt.